

Remembering the Merchant Navy

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A few months ago I was asked to research the role of Newfoundlanders in the Merchant Navy. I was astounded by what I found. I went into this project knowing very little about the merchant navy and came out with a wealth of interesting information. In honour of Remembrance Day, I would like to share with you some of what I learned about the brave members of the merchant marines.

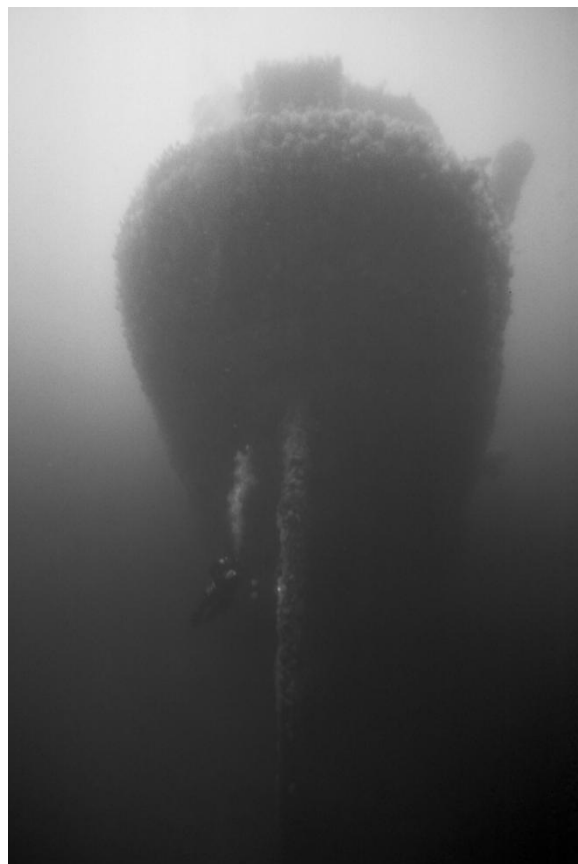
During World War II, the Germans were determined to starve out Britain and ruin morale for the allies. For six long years the Battle of the Atlantic raged with the German U-Boats having a distinct advantage in the field. The allies could not produce merchant vessels as fast as the submarines were sinking them. The most dangerous area of the Atlantic was known as the Black Pit, where the ships had to sail without air coverage; in the Pit wolf packs ran rampant sinking convoy vessels. Brave Newfoundlanders served on many of these doomed ships, in efforts to bring much needed supplies to Britain.

In March 1940, Newfoundland received a call for volunteers to join the British merchant navy. Large numbers of men flocked to help and enrolled in the British, Canadian, and Allied merchant marines. They navigated a the Atlantic, with much activity in the waters around Newfoundland, which had been designated as dangerous. Newfoundlanders filled many jobs on these ships, from manning guns to acting as stewards and stewardesses. It is hard to estimate the number of men and women who enrolled in the merchant navy because they did not keep thorough records of



those who served. Many Newfoundlanders who did join came from commercial ships around the island such as the Coastal vessels. It is thought that 5,000 – 10,000 Newfoundlanders volunteered by the end of the war.

Women also volunteered on the merchant vessels, often as stewardesses on passenger ships such as the *SS Caribou*. There is one female in the tally of merchant marine casualties.



Stern of the wreck of the *SS Rose Castle*, off Bell Island (Photo: Vlada Dekina, wrecksandreefs.com)

Merchant mariners were prominent on the front lines during the war and suffered numerous casualties, both across the Atlantic and close to home. In 1942 – 1943 it was thought that U-Boats were sinking up to 33 merchant vessels a week. In 1942, the SS *Caribou* was sunk off the coast of Newfoundland with a high loss of life, including many merchant mariners. That same year, four merchant vessels were sunk in the Bell Island Strait and the wharf at Bell Island was hit by a torpedo. It was no small wonder that Newfoundland waters were considered dangerous.

Britain began to press any available ship into service, no matter the condition, and many of the ships that these brave men served on had previously been labeled unseaworthy.

In order to help the merchant ships reach their destinations, the allies began to sail in convoys. A large group of merchants would be escorted by military vessels in an attempt to get safely across the Atlantic. The first convoy sailed out of Halifax in September 1939. The convoys also had air support as far as the Black Pit, where the aircraft would have to turn back to refuel. Convoys, though great for protection, brought with them their own set of problems. Bad weather often caused the ships to run into each other, damaging or sinking them. Being a Merchant Marine was a dangerous job.

332 men and one woman are estimated to have lost their lives while serving in the merchant navy. This number has come under scrutiny in the last few years, but since many joined the merchant navy when it had no formal method of keeping track of its members, it is hard to account for those lost at sea during the war.

Please spend a few moments this Remembrance Day to give thanks to the Army, the Navy, the Air force, the Newfoundland Foresters, and the merchant navy.



Torpedo near the wreck of the SS *Rose Castle*, off Bell Island (Photo: Vlada Dekina, wrecksandreefs.com)

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